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# What kind of people will we be?

**D**igna Barreda de Ubéda knows something about the men President Ronald Reagan has called "the moral equals of our Founding Fathers," the rebels seeking to overthrow the Nicaraguan government. Ms. de Ubéda, 29, and her husband were visiting a relative in the Nicaraguan border town of Sapote when they were abducted by rebel soldiers. "There were 50 or 60 of them in the group," she told a reporter for the New York Times, "and over five days, they took turns raping me until each had his chance." While they were raping her, these avatars of Jefferson and Madison stabbed her with bayonets in the legs and side. And they forced her husband to watch.

Santos Roger Briones, 16, has also had a glimpse of the contras' terrorism. Along with 30 other unarmed civilian volunteers assigned to pick coffee beans, he was riding in a government-owned dump truck when it was ambushed by the contras. Thrown off the truck by the force of an explosion, Santos Briones feigned death as men in blue uniforms stole his boots and wallet; he then listened, horrified, as they cut the throats of the people who stayed on the truck. Next, they set the truck on fire. "From where I was lying," he told a reporter, "I could hear the groans and screams of those who were being burned alive." Twenty-one civilians were killed in that attack, some as young as 5, others as old as 60.

These and other atrocities were the subject of a recent report by a three-member team led by Reed Brody, a former New York State assistant attorney general. The report listed 28 incidents that it says resulted in the assassination, torture, rape, kidnapping and mutilation of civilians." (The New York Times re-interviewed several witnesses cited in the report to confirm its accuracy.) The Brody report, and a

similar study by the independent human-rights group America's Watch, come at a time when the Administration is seeking to drum up support for the contras. Questioned about the reports, a State Department official conceded that the contras have been running amok. "They have a problem with young girls," he was quoted as saying; in other words, they kidnap and rape for sport, these Franklins and Washingtons of freedom.

It is a hard thing to say, but we are partly responsible for these outrages. More than \$80 million of our tax money has flowed to the contra army since the Reagan Administration began its program of covert aid in 1981; and if Congress goes along with Reagan in a vote expected later this month, the aid, which it cut off last year, will resume.

The Administration has been prodigal with rationales for aiding the contras. It has argued that since Nicaragua is supplying the Salvadoran guerrillas, we are justified in loosing guerrillas against Nicaragua. But a CIA operative who spent two years looking for evidence to back up the Administration's claim said last year that, in the words of the America's Watch report, "it simply is not there." The Administration has argued that the Sandinista regime of Nicaragua violates the human rights of its people in the most wanton way, and that for humanitarian reasons it must be removed. But America's Watch concludes that "the Administration has used human-rights arguments with a profound cynicism and disregard for truth." Finally, it has cited the swollen size of Nicaragua's army as an ominous sign of her aggressive designs on her neighbors - as if the Administration itself had not provoked Nicaragua's heavy-handed conscription by fielding an army against her.

Driving these arguments is a primitive ideological antagonism: Nicaragua

is some sort of Communist state, and in the age of Reagan, it is America's business to liberate such states, especially when they are as small as Nicaragua (3 million people) and have the cheek to be in our hemisphere.

While the America's Watch report makes clear that the Sandinistas are not the moral equals of the Founding Fathers either, it does not portray Nicaragua as a Communist totalitarian state. But even if it were, by subsidizing the contras' terrorism, the Administration would be giving anticommunism a bad name. For our anticommunism is not an end in itself. We hate communism because its essence is concentrated in what George Orwell called the central image of totalitarianism: a jackboot crashing down on a human face, the face of a woman like Digna Barreda de Ubéda, or that of a boy like Santos Briones. We hate communism because of what it does to decent people like them: because it is cruel, because it is based not on law or consent but on terror. In short, the values and repugnances that make us loathe communism must make us loathe the contras, too. For in the end, it is what we hold dear that divides us from the Communists: That they have missiles pointing at us does not give us the moral warrant to hate their system, not when we have missiles pointing at them.

One test for the morality of possible action, John Dewey wrote, is to ask yourself: What kind of person do I want to be? And to reject actions that would sully your idea of yourself. That is the question of national morality raised by Reagan's plan to resume aid to the contras. Do we want to be a nation that rents killers by the pound to fight dirty little wars, or do we want to be that haven of hope of the Founding Fathers' noblest dream? What kind of people do we want to be?

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